Graduate Research Student Policy: A Study of United Kingdom Universities' Practices

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Abstract: In every university, there is code of practice or policy for graduate research student which contained in the student handbook. Every student will be given this handbook during their registration at the university. Part of this policy was designed to protect the student's interest and welfare by stating the responsibility of the student, supervisor, school and effective ways of supervision. The question is how far this policy has been practiced and implemented effectively? Hence, there were 40 graduate research student policies have been studied from 40 universities in the United Kingdom. There were also 110 foreign graduate students had involved in order to obtain the information needed. It was found in the research that 74% of the respondents had agreed that the policy is very helpful and worked. This paper will identify the most effective ways in practicing this policy towards the effectiveness in graduate research student supervision.
Keywords: Graduate Student Policy, Research student, Supervision, University, University practices

Introduction

PhD students should aim to complete their degrees within the time given, which is the period of most studentship awards. This is the reason why research student policies are designed as a guideline to enable students to complete their degrees successfully within the time limits. The research student policies typically also defines the responsibilities of students and supervisors, suggesting what each can reasonably expect of the other, and gives examples of good supervisory practice. Basically, the research student policies can be used as a guideline by the supervisor, student and department. The policies are intended to provide a framework for research in an atmosphere of scholarship and collegiality.

Research student policies can be found under many different names, such as code of practice for research students, quality assurance in research degrees, research degrees regulations, code of conduct, ethical principles and guidelines, postgraduate procedures or memoranda to graduate students. Generally, research student policies are one of the main topics highlighted in the Student Handbook. These topics were: about the department, patterns of the programme, supervision and regulations relating to theses. They are referred to as a code of practice for the purpose of this research. Some of the universities have elaborated these four topics in detail, whereas others say relatively little about them. In practice, different universities have different ways of presenting their Student Handbooks. Generally the purpose of the Student Handbook is to introduce student to the school as well as university-wide procedures, facilities and services for research degree students. It is compiled from a range of sources and serves a variety of purposes. Figure 1 has been developed to clarify the contents of the handbooks, summarising the relevant aspects. However this research will concentrate on the supervision section or research student policies even though it is useful to discuss other sections as they are related to each other.
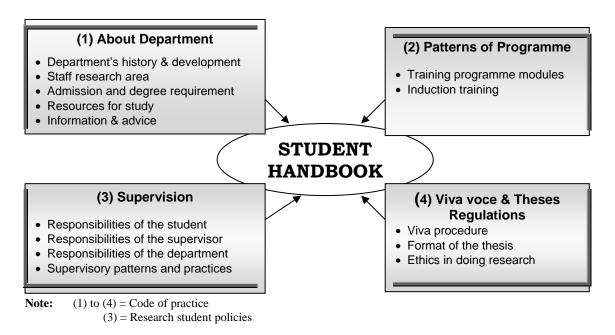
Note: (1) to (4) = Code of practice
                  (3) = Research student policies

Figure 1: *The Main Topics Listed in Student Handbooks*

The researcher has to study this policy in order to understand the benefits of systematic policies regarding the supervision of research students and to identify their impact on practice. Generally, the students are given the Student Handbook on their admission day so they should be aware of it and understand its contents clearly. In this way, they can get to know many things related to their life as a PhD student and how to manage their research throughout their programme. The guidelines in the handbook about the responsibilities of the student, the responsibilities of the supervisor, the responsibilities of the department and supervisory patterns and practices that appear in research student policies can be very supportive to the students during their study.

Methodology

All the policies were collected from the handbooks of the universities. Getting the data was quite a complicated task, as the researcher had to search through particular universities websites one by one in order to find it. The reason for choosing to study the policies of established British universities in this research due to the fact that they have a high reputation and are well-known for teaching and research. Therefore, it is useful to get information on the policies as it may benefit students if they are aware of them before deciding to pursue their PhD studies in the United Kingdom. Hence, there were 40 graduate research student policies have been studied from 40 universities in the United Kingdom. Besides getting the data from the Student Handbook, this research also used the survey approach to 110 Malaysian PhD students studying in universities in United Kingdom. The questionnaire was sent by e-mail which could be obtained by main sponsors of Malaysian students studying abroad. In giving general information to respondents about this policy, the researcher gave a general account of research student policies by stating at the top of the questionnaire that 'Research student policies consist of information about the rights and responsibilities of the student, the supervisor and the school'.

The important topic that is featured in the handbooks is supervision. This comprises four main aspects, which are much related to this research, namely: responsibilities of the research student, responsibilities of the supervisor, responsibilities of the department and supervisory patterns and practices. In synthesising these four main aspects in forty universities reviewed as mentioned in Table 1, the researcher had to read the whole of the handbooks to find the main subjects mentioned above and other interesting aspects highlighted there in. Some universities emphasised these four aspects in general whereas, others deal with them in detail or more deeply. So, supervising practice is broken down into the four main aspects, namely the responsibilities of the research student, the responsibilities of the supervisor, the responsibilities of the department and supervisory patterns and practices, which constitute research student policies.

Results and Discussion

Table 1 shows the synthesis of research student policies in forty selected universities in the United Kingdom. As already mentioned, there are four main aspects that the researcher has decided to discuss under the topic of supervision (Figure 1). After studying the handbooks of all the universities reviewed, the researcher was able to determine whether or not the selected aspects listed in the Table 1 are referred to in them. As mentioned above, the researcher has decided to review induction training as an important aspect in research student policies. Induction training is the selected aspect because the researcher believes that by attending this, students can get to know at least basic information about supervision. This is why induction training is included in Table 1. However induction training will be discussed as part of the responsibility of the department. Therefore the researcher has decided to examine whether the universities reviewed have presented their research student policies in their handbooks. In fact, there are some universities that cover aspects in the handbook that others do not. Accordingly, the researcher has added an 'other' column for the purpose of pointing out anything that is found interesting in one particular university but not in the others. However, all the 'other' aspects are related to supervision.

Table 2 shows that amongst the respondent who attended the training, 62.7 percent enrolled in the period September to October and 20.9 percent in the period of January to April. The result shows that there is a strong possibility that respondents who register for their study as part of the January to April and September to October intakes attend the training programme. This is because within these intakes, there are quite a lot of newcomers to the university, so the school has arranged and organised proper meetings or Induction Training Programme. Those who register outside those particular months, are assumed to do it all on their own with only a little assistance from faculty members because only a few students enrol within the periods May to August and November to December.

Table 1: *Synthesising Research Student Policies in Forty Selected Universities*

University	Student's Responsibilities	Supervisor's *1 Responsibilities	Department's *2 Responsibilities	Supervision Practices	Induction Training	Code of Practice*	Others
1. Aberdeen	✓	✓	✓	✓	x	✓	
2. Bath	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	Important events from years 1- 3
3. Birmingham	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	Responsibility of mentor
4. Bristol	✓	Adviser	✓	✓	x	✓	
5. Brunel	✓	✓	Head of Department	✓	x	✓	
6. Cambridge	✓	✓	✓	✓	x	✓	
7. City	✓	✓	Research Director	✓	✓	✓	Internally/externally registered student
8. College London	✓	✓	✓	✓	x	✓	Women advisers & graduate tutor
9. De Monfort	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	
10. Dundee	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	Good supervisory practice checklist, management of overseas students
11. Durham	✓	✓	Postgraduate Director	✓	✓	✓	PhD year plan from 1st to 3rd year
12. Edinburgh	✓	✓	✓	✓	x	✓	Assistant and co supervisor's role
13. Exeter	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	Peer support & mentor
14. Glamorgon	✓	Director of Study	✓	✓	✓	✓	
15. Glasgow	✓	✓	Head of Department	✓	✓	✓	
16. Greenwich	✓	✓	School Director	✓	x	✓	
17. Heriott-Watt	✓	✓	✓	✓	x	✓	Mentor's role
18. Keele	✓	✓	✓	✓	x	✓	
19. Kent	✓	✓	✓	✓	X	✓	Technical support
20. Lancaster	✓	✓	✓	✓	x	✓	Special problems that international students could experience
21. Leeds	✓	✓	✓	✓	x	✓	
22. Leicester	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	
23. Liverpool	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	

Table 1: *Synthesising Research Student Policies in Forty Selected Universities (Continued)*

University	Student's Responsibilities	Supervisor's *1 Responsibilities	Department's *2 Responsibilities	Supervision Practices	Induction Training	Code of Practice*	Others
24. London Goldsmiths	✓	✓	Departmental Postgraduate Group	✓	✓	✓	
25. Loughborough	✓	✓	Director of Research	✓	x	✓	
26. Manchester	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	
27. Middlesex	✓	✓	x	x	x	✓	
28. Nottingham	✓	✓	Head of School	✓	✓	✓	Women's adviser
29. Oxford	✓	✓	x	x	✓	✓	
30. Reading	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	
31. Salford	✓	✓	x	✓	x	✓	
32. Sheffield	✓	✓	✓	✓	x	✓	
33. Southampton	✓	✓	✓	✓	x	✓	
34. St. Andrews	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	
35. Surrey	✓	✓	Head of School	✓	✓	✓	Collaborative supervisor
36. Sussex	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	Collaborative & independent distance student
37. UMIST	✓	✓	✓	x	✓	✓	Technician role
38. Wales Cardiff	✓	✓	Head of Department	✓	✓	✓	
39. Warwick	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	Guidelines on stage of PhD research from year 1-3
40. Westminster	✓	✓	Director of Study	✓	✓	✓	

Note:

*Code of Practice consists of: ***1 and *2:**
- Information about the Department; Information, Advice & Support   Some universities use different terminology, as stated in the column
- Patterns of the Programme/ Research & Induction Training
- Supervision
- Regulations Relating to Theses

Table 2: *Induction Training Programme in Relation to Registration Month*

Registration month	Attended the Induction Training Programme (N=67)	
	Frequency (N)	Percentage (%)
September –October	42	62.7
November-December	5	7.5
January-April	14	20.9
May-August	6	8.9
TOTAL	67	100

Table 3: *Respondents' Awareness of Research Student Policies*
(N=110 respondents)

	TOTAL	
Awareness about Research Student Policies	Frequency (N)	Percentage (%)
Are there any policies in the school concerning research student supervision?	107	97.3
If 'Yes': (N=107)		
Do the policies work?	74	69.2
Are the policies helpful?	72	67.3
Please give your opinion regarding the Policies (N=107)		
Research student policies are compiled in a written document and are available to everyone in the school	97	90.7
Research student policies are explicitly stated	81	75.7
Research student policies are presented to students by their supervisor	41	38.3

(Scale: Yes or No)

For those who answered 'Yes' to question: 'Are there any policies in the school concerning research student supervision?' had to answer all questions about those policies. Table 3 shows the frequency of student awareness of research student policies. The results show that 107 respondents (97.3%) said that they are aware of the policies in the school concerning research student supervision. Of this total, 69.2 percent said the policies worked and 67.3 said they were helpful.

The policies worked on many occasions and, for example, could be used to resolve problems (mostly about the relationship with a supervisor if that went wrong). If the policies work, students have the right to choose a new supervisor if necessary. The policies are helpful to students as well as supervisors, because they can be used as a guideline for both their responsibilities. The result also indicates that 90.7 percent out of 107 respondents said that the research student policies are compiled in a written document and are available to everyone in the school. This is followed by 75.7 percent of respondents who said that the policies are explicitly stated. However, only 38.3 percent of respondents stated that the policies are presented to

students by their supervisor. This means that most respondents who are aware of the policies have not been told about them by their supervisor. Those who did not agree with the statement, had to answer question which is about the appropriate person responsible for presenting the policies to them. They had to pick one answer from the list provided to represent their choice.

Table 4 shows the results regarding the person responsible for making them aware of the policies. As stated in Table 3, only 38.3 percent of respondents stated that their supervisor was the person who should tell them about the policies. Accordingly, 62.7 percent of them do not agree with the statement that 'Research student policies are presented to students by their supervisor'. Of these, 38.2 percent agreed that the faculty administrator or graduate coordinator is the person most responsible for making the student aware of the policies, whereas 14.5 percent of respondents stated that they are responsible for making themselves aware of the policies. Only 7.3 percent of respondents chose adviser and 2.7 percent chose the postgraduate tutor as the person responsible for making the students aware of policies.

Table 4: *Respondents' Perception of the Person Responsible for Making them Aware of Research Student Policies*
(N=110 respondents)

The most responsible person for making the students aware of the policies	TOTAL	
	Frequency (N)	Percentage (%)
Faculty administrator/Graduate coordinator	42	38.2
Myself (student)	16	14.5
Postgraduate tutor	3	2.7
Student adviser	8	7.3
Supervisor	41	37.3
TOTAL	110	100

In response to questions which respondents stated that they thought the policies did not work or were not helpful, those who chose the answer 'No' (representing the fact that they do not agree with the statements) had to give their reason. Only five respondents who chose to answer 'No' to questions that they thought the policies did not work or were not helpful gave their reason or responded to the open-ended question by jotting down their reason in the box provided. It is common that very few respondents are willing to answer open-ended questions, and this is what happened in this case. The five respondents' comments are as follows:

1: The departments' policies and procedures are not in line with graduate supervision. The supervisor doesn't know the policies. The department doesn't give a good welcome to new overseas students on the overall policies and procedures of the graduate student programme.
2: The policy needs commitment from the people involved to make them succeed. All the people involved, the students, technicians and supervisors must have understood and made the policy workable.

3: Often, during the course of study, supervisors and students do not refer to the policies.

4:   Very difficult to keep up with the policies as each student's project is different and as a result the supervisory level is different. The most important thing is for the supervisor to be aware of these policies and tailor them to each student's need. Without this, the policies will never work at all.

5:   Most matters that deal with research students are at the prerogative of the supervisor in charge. Available policies are not adhered to, in most instances, whereas students are responsible for knowing by themselves any procedures that are required of them.

The discussion of the four main aspects covered in research student policies is summarised in Table 5.

Table 5: *Summary of Four Main Aspects Frequently Referred to in Research Student Policies in Forty British Universities*

Responsibilities of the Supervisor	Responsibilities of the Student	Responsibilities of the Department	Supervisory Patterns and Practices
1. Advice and guidance on the nature of research	1. Define the research	1. Allocate an appropriate qualified supervisor	1. Decide supervisory arrangements
2. Advise on planning of the thesis	2. Provide written work	2. Ensure supervisor and student are issued with safety instructions	2. Agreement on the timetable is important
3. Request written work; return it with criticism of the content	3. Discuss the type of guidance agreed	3. Prepare Induction Training Programme and provide students with training in research techniques	3. Frequency of meeting depends on the research stage and disciplines
4. Provide expert knowledge	4. Provide annual formal reports on progress	4. Provide care for overseas students who may need frequent contact and advice	4. Length of meetings vary but an hour is usual
5. Encourage students to attend conferences and seminars	5. Take the initiative in raising problems	5. Provide substitute supervisor in the absence of the main supervisor from the university for more than six weeks	5. Starting meeting with questions about the student's personal life
6. Give personal academic support	6. Maintain progress	6. Provide good departmental facilities	
7. Ensure that students are aware of the university regulations	7. Ensure formality and compliance with regulations	7. Prepare the admission procedure	
8. Put student in touch with other experts in the field	8. Develop own work	8. Allocate an adviser	
9. Monitor the students progress	9. Raise any training needs	9. Provide information on the complaints procedure	
10. Maintain regular contact with students	10. Observe the safety precautions	10. Provide information and guidance on regulations	
11. Arrange English support services	11.Decide when to submit the thesis	11. Arrange examination or viva voce	

Conclusion

Students may be treated differently in terms of supervision, as some may require more attention and help, while others may like as much freedom as they can have. The nature of this supervision should depend on the student's subject area and background, and the work patterns and personalities of the student and supervisor. Nevertheless, both student and supervisor have certain responsibilities that must be fulfilled in some way. It is agreed in research student policies throughout British universities reviewed that the responsibilities of the supervisor and department range from giving assistance in academic matters to providing, supporting for the student's welfare. However the student should work hard towards completion of the PhD by taking into account the department and university regulations. As a mature student, one should

work independently although the supervisor is there to provide guidance, advice, support and encouragement where appropriate. Supervisors are also human beings who usually have their own characteristics and style of supervision. The research student policies seem to be guidelines on paper and may not be followed by them at all. This also happens to a student when he has a timetable, however very often a student can follow and work on the basis of the agenda and due date stated in the timetable. Those who think the policies are very useful and helpful may see the handbook as a place of reference if something goes wrong or the student needs more explanation in relation to supervision or studies.

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